

McCarthy Justin Huntly

The Lady of Loyalty House: A Novel



Justin McCarthy

**The Lady of Loyalty
House: A Novel**

«Public Domain»

McCarthy J.

The Lady of Loyalty House: A Novel / J. McCarthy — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

PROLOGUE	6
I	7
II	11
III	14
IV	16
V	18
VI	21
VII	23
VIII	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

Justin Huntly McCarthy

The Lady of Loyalty House: A Novel

AD SILVIAM

Take for our lady's loyal sake
This vagrant tale of mine,
Where Cavalier and Roundhead break
A reed for Right Divine,
A tale it pleased me to make,
And most to make it thine.

The Solemn Muse that watches o'er
The actions of the great,
And bids this Venturer to soar,
And that to stand and wait,
Will swear she never heard before
The deeds that I relate.

But all is true for me and you,
Though History denies;
I know thy Royal Standard flew
Against autumnal skies,
And find thy rarest, bravest blue
In Brilliana's eyes.

J. H. McC.
August 10, 1904.

PROLOGUE

In the October of 1642 there came to Cambridge a man from over-seas. He was travelling backward, after the interval of a generation, through the stages of his youth. From his landing at the port whence he had sailed so many years before in chase of fortune he came to London, where he had bustled and thundered as a stage-player. Here he found a new drama playing in a theatre that took a capital city for its cockpit. He observed, sinister and diverted, for a while, and, being an adaptable man, shifted his southern-colored garments, over-blue, over-red, over-yellow in their seafaring way, for the sombre gray surcharged with solemn black. A translated man, if not a changed man, he journeyed to the university town of his stormy student hours, and there the black in his habit deepened at the expense of the gray. In the quadrangle of Sidney Sussex College he meditated much on the changes that had come about since the days when Sidney Sussex had expelled him, very peremptorily, from her gates. The college herself had altered greatly since his day. The fair court that Ralph Symons had constructed had now its complement in the fair new court of Francis Clerke. The enlargement of his mother-college was not so marvellous to him, however, as the enlargement of one among her sons. A fellow-commoner of his time had, like himself, come again to Cambridge, arriving thither by a different road. This fellow-commoner was now the member in Parliament for Cambridge, had buckled a soldier's baldric over a farmer's coat, had carried things with a high hand in the ancient collegiate city, had made himself greatly liked by these, greatly disliked by those.

Musing philosophically, but also observing shrewdly and inquiring as pertinaciously as dexterously, our traveller made himself familiar with places of public resort, sat in taverns where he tasted ale more soberly than was his use or his pleasure, listened, patently devout, to godly exhortations, and implicated himself by an interested silence in strenuous political opinions. From all this he learned much that amazed, much that amused him, but what interested him most of all had to do with the third stage of his retrospective pilgrimage. If he had not been bound for Harby eventually, what came to his ears by chance would have spurred him thither, ever keen as he was to behold the vivid, the theatrical in life. Women had always delighted him, if they had often damned him, and there was a woman's name on rumor's many tongues when rumor talked of Harby. So it came to be that he rode sooner than he had proposed, and far harder than he had proposed, through green, level Cambridgeshire, through green, hilly Oxfordshire, with Harby for his goal. Chameleon-like, he changed hues on the way, shifting, with the help of his wallet, back into a gaudier garb less likely to be frowned on in regions kindly to the King.

I

THE STRANGER AT THE GATES

The village of Harby was vastly proud of its inn, and by consequence the innkeeper thought highly of the village of Harby. He had been a happy innkeeper for the better part of a reasonably long life, and he had hoped to be a happy innkeeper to that life's desirably distant close. But the world is not made for innkeepers by innkeepers, and Master Vallance was newly come into woes. For it had pleased certain persons of importance lately to come to loggerheads without any consideration for the welfare of Master Vallance, and in trying to peer through the dust of their broils on the possible future for England and himself, he could prognosticate little good for either. Master Vallance was a patriot after his fashion; he wished his country well, but he wished himself better, and the brawling of certain persons of importance might, apart from its direct influence upon the fortunes of the kingdom, indirectly result in Master Vallance's downfall. For the persons of importance whose bickerings so grievously interested Master Vallance were on the one side his most sacred and gracious Majesty King Charles I., and on the other a number of units as to whose powers or purposes Master Vallance entertained only the most shadowy notions, but who were disagreeably familiar to him in a term of mystery as the Parliament.

In the mellow October evening Master Vallance sat at his inn door and dandled troubled thoughts. The year of his lord 1642 having begun badly, threatened to end worse. Master Vallance chewed the cud of country-side gossip. He reminded himself that not so very far away the King had set up his standard at Nottingham and summoned all loyal souls to his banner; that not so very far away in Cambridge, a fussy gentleman, a Mr. Cromwell, member for that place, had officiously pushed the interests of the Parliament by raising troops of volunteers and laying violent hands upon the University plate. Master Vallance tickled his chin and tried to count miles and to weigh probabilities. Royalty was near, but Parliament seemed nearer; which would be the first of the fighting forces to spread a strong hand over Harby?

Master Vallance emptied his mug and, turning his head, looked up the village street, and over the village street to the rising ground beyond and the gray house that crowned it. He sighed as he surveyed the familiar walls of Harby House, because of one unfamiliar object. Over the ancient walls, straight from the ancient roof, sprang a flag-staff, and from that flag-staff floated a banner which Master Vallance knew well enough to be the royal standard of England's King. Master Vallance also knew, for he had been told this by Master Marfleet, the school-master, that the Lady of Harby had no right to fly the standard, seeing that the presence of that standard implied the bodily presence of the King. But he also knew, still on Master Marfleet's authority, that the Lady of Harby had flung that standard to the winds in no ignorance nor defiance of courtly custom. He knew that the high-spirited, beautiful girl had been the first in all the country-side to declare for the King, prompt where others were slow, loyal where others faltered, and that she flew the King's flag from her own battlements in subtle assertion of her belief that in every faithful house the King was figuratively, or, as it were, spiritually, a guest.

Master Vallance, reflecting drearily upon the uncertainties of an existence in which high-spirited, beautiful young ladies played an important part, became all of a sudden, though unaccountably, aware that he was not alone. Moving his muddled head slowly away from the walls of Harby, he allowed it to describe the better part of a semicircle before it paused, and he gazed upon the face of a stranger. The stranger was eying the innkeeper with a kind of good-natured ferociousness or ferocious good-nature, which little in the stranger's appearance or demeanor tended to make more palatable to the timid eyes of Master Vallance.

“Outlandish,” was the epithet which lumbered into Master Vallance’s mind as he gaped, and the epithet fitted the new-comer aptly. He was, indeed, an Englishman; that was plain enough to the instinct of another Englishman, if only for the gray-blue English eyes; and yet there was little that was English in the sun-scorched darkness of his face, little that was English in the almost fantastic effrontery of his carriage, the more than fantastic effrontery of his habit.

When the stranger perceived that he had riveted Master Vallance’s attention, he smiled a derisive smile, which allowed the innkeeper to observe a mouthful of teeth irregular but white. Then he extended a lean, brown hand whose fingers glittered with many rings, and caught Master Vallance by his fat shoulder, into whose flesh the grip seemed to sink like the resistless talons of a bird of prey. Slowly he swayed Master Vallance backward and forward, while over the dark face rippled a succession of leers, grins, and grimaces, which had the effect of making Master Vallance feel thoroughly uncomfortable. Nor did the stranger’s speech, when speech came, carry much of reassurance.

“Bestir thee, drowsy serving-slave of Bacchus,” the stranger chanted, in a pompous, high-pitched voice. “Emerge from the lubberland of dreams, and be swift in attendance upon a wight whose wandering star has led him to your hospitable gate.”

As the stranger uttered these last words his hand had drawn the bemused innkeeper towards him: with their utterance he suddenly released his grip, thereby causing Master Vallance to lurch heavily backward and bump his shoulders sorely against the inn wall. The stranger thrust his face close to Master Vallance’s, and while a succession of grimaces rippled over its sunburned surface he continued, in a tone of mock pathos:

“Do you shut your door against the houseless and the homeless, O iron-hearted innkeeper? Can the wandering orphan find no portion in your heart?”

Then, as Master Vallance was slowly making sure that he had to deal with a dangerous lunatic, the stranger drew himself up and swayed to and fro in a fit of inextinguishable laughter.

“Lordamercy upon me,” he said, when he had done laughing, in a perfectly natural voice. “I have seen some frightened fools before, but never a fool so frightened. Tell me, honest blockhead, did you ever hear such a name as Halfman?”

Master Vallance, torpidly reassured, meditated. “Halfman,” he murmured. “Halfman. Ay, there was one in this village, long ago, had such a name. He had a roguish son, and they say the son came to a bad end.”

The new-comer nodded his head gravely.

“He had a roguish son,” he said; “but I am loath to admit that he came to a bad end, unless it be so to end at ease in Harby. For I am that same Hercules Halfman, at your service, my ancient ape, come back to Harby after nigh thirty years of sea-travel and land-travel, with no other purpose in my mind than to sit at my ease by mine own hearth in winter and to loll in my garden in summer. What do you say to that, O father of all fools?”

Master Vallance, having nothing particular to say, said, for the moment, nothing. He was dimly appreciating, however, that this vociferous intruder upon his quiet had all the appearance of one who was well to do and all the manner of one accustomed to have his own way in the world. It seemed to him, therefore, that the happiest suggestion he could make to the home-comer was to quench his thirst, and, further, to do so with the aid of a flask of wine.

The stranger agreed to the first clause of the proposition and vetoed the second.

“Ale,” he said, emphatically. “Honest English ale. I am of a very English temper to-day; I would play the part of a true-hearted Englishman to the life, and, therefore, my tipple is true-hearted English ale.”

Master Vallance motioned to his guest to enter the house, but Halfman denied him.

“Out in the open,” he carolled. “Out in the open, friend.” He rattled off some lines of blank verse in praise of the liberal air that set Master Vallance staring before he resumed plain speech.

“When a man has lived in such hissing hot places that he is fain to spend his life under cover, he is glad to keep abroad in this green English sweetness.”

He had seated himself comfortably on the settle by now, and he stretched out his arms as if to embrace the prospect. Master Vallance dived into the inn, and when he emerged a few seconds later, bearing two large pewter measures, the traveller was still surveying the landscape with the same air of ecstasy. Master Vallance handed him a full tankard, which Halfman drained at a draught and rattled on the table with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Right English ale,” he attested. “Divine English ale. What gold would I not have given, what blood would I not have spilled for such a draught as that, so clean, so cool, so noble, in the lands where I have lived. The Dry Tortugas – the Dry Tortugas, and never a drop of English ale to cool an English palate.”

He seemed so affected by the reflection that he let his hand close, as if unconsciously, upon Master Vallance’s tankard, which Master Vallance had set upon the table untasted, and before the innkeeper could interfere its contents had disappeared down Halfman’s throat and a second empty vessel rattled upon the board.

The eloquence of disappointment on Master Vallance’s face as he beheld this dexterity moved the thirst-slaked Halfman to new mirth. But while he laughed he thrust his hand in his breeches-pocket and pulled out a palm full of gold pieces.

“Never fear, Master Landlord,” he shouted; “you shall drink of your best at my expense, I promise you. We will hob-a-nob together, I tell you. Keep me your best bedroom, lavender-scented linen and all. I will take my ease here till I set up my Spanish castle on English earth, and in the mean time I swear I will never quarrel with your reckoning. I have lived so long upon others that it is only fair another should live upon me for a change. So fill mugs again, Master Landlord, and let us have a chat.”

Master Vallance did fill the mugs again, more than once, and he and the stranger did have a chat; at least, they talked together for the better part of an hour. In all that time Master Vallance, fumbling foolishly with flagrant questions, learned little of his companion save what that companion was willing, or maybe determined, that he should learn. Master Halfman made no concealment of it that he had been wild at Cambridge, and he hinted, indeed, broadly enough, that he had had a companion in his wildness who had since grown to be a godly man that carried the name of Cromwell. He admitted frankly that his pranks cast him forth from Cambridge, and that he had been a stage-player for a time in London, in proof whereof he declaimed to the amazed Master Vallance many flowing periods from Beaumont, Fletcher, Massinger, and their kind – mental fireworks that bedazzled the innkeeper. Of his voyages, indeed, he spoke more vaguely if not more sparingly, conjuring up gorgeous visions to the landlord of pampas and palm-lands, where gold and beauty forever answered to the ready hand. But Master Halfman, for his part volubly indistinct and without seeming to interrogate at all, was soon in possession of every item of information concerning the country-side that was of the least likelihood to serve him. He learned, for instance, what he had indeed guessed, that the simple country-folk knew little and cared little for the quarrel that was brewing over their heads, and had little idea of what the consequences might be to them and theirs. He learned that the local gentry were, for the most part, lukewarm politicians; that Peter Rainham and Paul Hungerford were keeping themselves very much to themselves, and being a brace of skinflints were fearing chiefly for their money-bags; while Sir Blaise Mickleton, who had been credited with the intention of riding to join his Majesty at Shrewsbury, had suddenly taken to his bed sick of a strange distemper which declared itself in no outward form, but absolutely forbade its victim to take violent action of any kind. He learned that there were exceptions to this tepidity. Sir Randolph Harby, of Harby Lesser, beyond the hill, Sir Rufus Quarryll, of Quarryll Tower, had mounted horse and whistled to men at the first whisper of the business and ridden like devils to rally on the King’s flag. He learned much that was familiar and important to him of the Harby

family history; he learned much that was unfamiliar and unimportant to him of local matters, such as that Master Marfleet, the village school-master, was inclined to say all that might be said in praise of the Parliament men, and that, when all was said and done, the only avowed out-and-out loyalist in the neighborhood was no man at all, but a beautiful, high-spirited girl-woman, the Lady Brilliana Harby.

The Lady Brilliana Harby. When Halfman was a lad gray Roland was Earl of Harby, a choleric scholar, seeming celibate in grain, though the title ran in direct male line. Suddenly, as Halfman now learned, gray Roland married a maid some forty years younger than he, and she gave him a child and died in the giving. This did not perpetuate the title, for the child was a girl, but it gave the gray lord something to cherish for the sake of his lost love. This child was now the Lady Brilliana, whom gray Roland had adored and spoiled to the day of his own death, hastened by a fit of rage at the news of the King's failure to capture the five members. Since then the Lady Brilliana had reigned alone at Harby, indifferent to suitors, and had flown the King's flag at the first point of war. "By Heaven!" said Halfman, "I will have a look at the Lady Brilliana."

II HARBY

As he tramped the muddy hill-road his mind was busy. The scent from the wet weeds on either side of him, heavy with the yester rains, brought back his boyhood insistently, and his memory leaped between then and now like a shuttlecock. He had dreamed dreams then; he was dreaming dreams now, though he had thought he was done with dreams. A few short months ago he had planned out his last part, the prosperous village citizen, the authority of the gossips, respectable and respected. His fancy had dwelt so fondly upon the house where he proposed to dwell that he seemed to know every crimson eave of it, every flower in the trim garden, the settle by the porch where he should sit and smoke his pipe and drain his can and listen to the booming of the bees, while he complacently savored the after-taste of discreditable adventures. He knew it so well in his mind that he had half come to believe that it really existed, that he had always owned it, that it truly awaited his home-coming, and his feeling as he entered the village that morning had been that he could walk straight to it, instead of abiding at the inn and going hither and thither day after day until he found in the market a homestead nearest to his picture. And now he was walking away from it, walking fairly fast, too, and walking whither? What business was it of his, after all, if some sad-faced fellows from Cambridge tramped across country to lay puritan hands upon Harby. What business was it of his if monarch browbeat Parliament or Parliament defied king? He owed nothing to either, cared nothing for either; what he owned he owed to his sharp sword, his dull conscience, his rogue's luck, and his player's heart. Why, then, was he going to Harby when he ought to be busy in the village looking for that house with crimson eaves and the bee-haunted garden?

He knew well enough, though he did not parcel out his knowledge into formal answers. In the first place, if the country was bent upon these civil broils, clearly his intended character of pipe-smoking, ale-drinking citizen was wholly unsuited to the coming play. Wherefore, in a jiff he had abandoned it, and now stood, mentally, as naked as a plucked fowl while he considered what costume he should wear and what character he should choose to interpret. His sense of humor tempted him to the sanctimonious suit of your out-and-out Parliament man; his love for finery and the high horse lured him to lovelocks and feathers. The old piratical instinct which he thought he had put to bed forever was awake in him, too, and asking which side could be made to pay the best for his services. If he must take sides, which side would fill his pockets the fuller? It was in the thick of these thoughts that he found himself within a few feet of the walls of the park of Harby.

The great gates were closed that his boyhood found always open. He smiled a little, and his smile increased as a figure stepped from behind the nearest tree within the walls, a sturdy, fresh-looking serving-fellow armed with a musketoon.

"Hail, friend," sang out Halfman, and "Stand, stranger," answered the man with the musketoon. Halfman eyed him good-humoredly.

"You do not carry your weapon well," he commented. "Were I hostile and armed you would be a dead jack before you could bring butt to shoulder. Yet you are a soldierly fellow and wear a fighting face."

The man with the musketoon met the censure and the commendation with the same frown as he surlily demanded the stranger's business at the gates of Harby.

"My business," answered Halfman, blithely, "is with the Lady of Harby," and before the other could shape the refusal of his eyes into an articulate grumble he went on, briskly, "Tell the Lady Brilliana Harby that an old soldier who is a Harby man born has some words to say to her which she may be willing to hear."

“Are you a King’s man,” the other questioned, still holding his weapon in awkward watchfulness of the stranger. Halfman laughed pleasantly.

“Who but a King’s man could hope to have civil speech with the Lady Brilliana Harby?”

He plucked off his hat as he spoke and waved it in the air with a flourish. “God save the King!” he shouted, loyally, and for the moment his heart was as loyal as his voice, untroubled by any thought of a venal sword and a highest bidder. Just there in the sunlight, facing the red walls of Harby and the flapping standard of the sovereign, on the eve of an interview with a bold, devoted lady, it seemed so fitly his cue to cry “God save the King!” that he did so with all the volume of his lungs.

The man with the musketoon seemed mollified by the new-comer’s specious show of allegiance.

“We shall see,” he muttered. “We shall see. Stay where you are, just where you are, and I will inquire at the hall. The gate is fast, so you can do no mischief while my back is turned.”

As he spoke he turned on his heel and, plunging among the trees in pursuit of a shorter cut than the winding avenue, disappeared from view. Halfman eyed the gateway with a smile.

“I do not think those bars would keep me out long if I had a mind to climb them,” he said to himself, complacently. But he was content to wait, walking up and down on the wet grass and running over in his mind the playhouse verses most suited to a soldier of fortune at the gate of a great lady. He had not to wait long. Before the jumble-cupboard of his memory had furnished him with the most felicitous quotation his ears heard a heavy tread through the trees, and the man with the musket hailed him, tramping to the gate. He carried a great iron key in his free hand, and this he fitted to the lock of the gate, which, unused to its inhospitable condition, creaked and groaned as he tugged at it. As at length it yielded the man of Harby opened one-half wide enough to admit the passage of a human body, and signalled to Halfman to come through. Halfman, smilingly observant, obeyed the invitation, and looked about him reflective while the gate was again put to and the key again turned in the lock to the same protesting discord. Many years had fallen from the tree of his life since he last trod the turf of Harby. All kinds of queer thoughts came about him, some melancholy, some full of mockery, some malign. He was no longer a poor lad with the world before him to whom the Lord of Harby was little less than the viceregent of God; he was a free man, he was a rich man, he had multiplied existences, had drunk of the wine of life from many casks and yet maintained through all a kind of cleanness of palate, ready for any vintage yet unbroached, be it white or red. The rough voice of his companion stirred him from his reverie.

“My lady will see you,” he said. “Follow me.”

As the man spoke he started off at a brisk pace upon the avenue with the evident intention of making his words the guide-marks to the new-comer’s deeds. But Halfman, never a one to follow tamely, with an easy stretch of his long limbs, swung himself lightly beside his uncivil companion, and without breathing himself in the least kept steadily a foot-space ahead of him. “I was ever counted a good walker,” he observed, cheerfully. “I have taken the world’s ways at the trot; you will never outpace me.”

The man of Harby slackened his speed for a second, and there came an ugly look of quarrel into his face which made it plain as a map for Halfman that there was immediate chance of a brawl and a tussle. He would have relished it well enough, knowing pretty shrewdly how it would end, but he contented himself for the moment, having other business in hand, with cheerful comment.

“Friend,” he said, “if we are both King’s men we have no leisure for quarrel, however much our fingers may itch. What is your name, valiant?”

The serving-man scowled at him for a moment; then his frown faded as he faced the smile and the bright, wild eyes of Halfman.

“My name is Thoroughgood,” he answered, and he added, civilly enough, as if conscious of some air of gentility in his companion, “John Thoroughgood, at your service.”

“A right good name for a right good fellow, if I know anything of men,” Halfman approved. “And I take it that you serve a right good lady.”

“My lady is my lady,” Thoroughgood replied, simply. “None like her as ever I heard tell of.”

Halfman endeavored by dexterous questionings to get some further information than this of the Lady of Harby from her sturdy servant, but Thoroughgood’s blunt brevity baffled him, and he soon reconciled himself to tramp in silence by his guide. So long as he remembered anything he remembered that passage through the park, the sweet smell of the wet grass, the waning splendors, russet and umber, of October leaves, the milky blueness of the autumn sky. This was, indeed, England, the long, half-forgotten, yet ever faintly remembered, in places of gold and bloodshed and furious suns, the place of peace of which the fortune-seeker sometimes dreamed and to which the fortune-maker chose to turn. The place of peace, where every man was arming, where citizens were handling steel with unfamiliar fingers, and where a rover like himself could not hope to let his sword lie idle. It was as he thought these thoughts that a turn of the road brought him face to face with Harby Hall, and all the episodes of a busy, bloody life seemed to dwindle into insignificance as he crossed the moat and passed with John Thoroughgood through the guarded portals and found himself once again in the shelter of the great hall.

The great hall at Harby was justly celebrated in Oxfordshire and in the neighboring counties as one of the loveliest examples of the rich domestic architecture which adorned the age of Elizabeth. “That prodigal bravery in building,” which Camden commends, made no fairer display than at Harby which had been designed by the great architect Thorp. Of a Florentine favor externally, it was internally a magnificent illustration of what Elizabethan decorators could do, and the great hall gave the note to which the whole scheme was keyed. Its wonderful mullioned windows looked out across the moat on the terrace, and beyond the terrace on the park. Its walls of panelled oak were splendid witnesses to the skill of great craftsmen. Its carved roof was a marvel of art that had learned much in Italy and had made it English with the hand of genius. Over the great fireplace two armored figures guarded rigidly the glowing shield of the founder of the house. Heroes of the house, heroines of the house, stared or smiled from their canvases on the mortal shadows that flitted through the great place till it should be their turn to swell the company of the elect in frames of gold. At one end of the hall sprang the fair staircase that was itself one of the greatest glories of Harby, with its wonderful balustrade, on which, landing by landing, stood the glorious carved figures of the famous angels of Harby.

III

MY LORD THE LADY

Between the topmost pair of carven angels a woman stood for a second looking down upon the man below. She had come quite suddenly from a door in the great gallery, and she paused for a moment on the topmost stair to survey the stranger who had summoned her. The stranger for his part stared up at the woman in an honest and immediate rapture. He was not unused to comely women, seen afar or seen at close quarters, but he felt very sure now that he had never seen a fair woman before. He prided himself on a most unreverential spirit, but his instant, most unfamiliar emotion was one of reverence. His fantastic wit idealized wildly enough. "An angel among angels," he exulted. "Ecce Rosa Mundi," his rusty scholarship trumpeted. His brain was a tumult of passionate phrases from passionate play-books, "Oh, thou art fairer than the evening air," overriding them all like a fairy swan upon a fairy sea. There never was such a woman since the world began; there never could be such a woman again till the world should end. And while his mind whirled with his own ecstasies and the ecstasies of dead players, the Lady Brilliana came slowly down the great stairs.

If the light of her on his eyes dazzled him, if the riot in his mind overprized her excellence, a saner man could scarce have failed to be delighted with the girl's beauty, a wiser to have denied her visible promises of merit. If better-balanced minds than the mind of Hercules Halfman, striving to conjure up the image of their dreams, had looked upon the face, upon the form, of Brilliana Harby, they might well have been willing to let imagination rest and be contented with the living flesh. Twenty sweet years of healthy country life had set their seal of grace and color upon the child of the union of two noble, sturdy stocks; all that was best of a brave dead man and a fair dead woman was mirrored in the pride of her face, the candor of her eyes, the courage of her mouth. Lost father and lost mother had made a strange pair; all their excellences were summed and multiplied in their bright child's being. A dozen gallant gentlemen of Oxford or Warwickshire would have given their fortunes for the smallest scissors-clipping of one sable curl, would have perilled their lives for one kind smile of those blue eyes, would have bartered their scanty chances of salvation for the first kiss of her fresh lips.

While she descended the stairs Halfman never took his eyes off the lady. He found himself wishing he were a painter, that he might perpetuate her graces through a few favored generations who might behold and adore her dimly as he beheld and adored her clearly, in her riding-dress of Lincoln green, whose voluminous superfluity she held gathered to her girdle as she moved. No painter could have scanned her more closely, noted more minutely the buckle of brilliants that captured the plume in her hat, the lace about her throat, the curious work upon her leather gauntlets, the firm foot in the small, square shoe, the riding-whip with its pommel of gold which she carried so commandingly. Lovely shadows trooped into his mind, names that had been naught but names to him till now – Rosalind, Camiola, Bianca. They had passed before him as so many smooth-faced youths, carrying awkwardly and awry their woman's wear, and lamentably uninspiring. Now he saw all these divine ladies take life incarnate in this divine lady, and he marvelled which of the loveliest of the rarely named company could have shone on her poet's eyes so dazzlingly as this creature.

He stared in silence till she had reached the foot of the staircase, still stared silent as she advanced towards him. There was nothing disrespectful in his direct glance, but the steadfastness and the silence stirred her challenge.

"Sir," she said, "when you asked to see me it was not, I hope, in the thought to stare me out of countenance."

Halfman made her a sweeping salutation and found his voice with an effort, but his words did not interpret the admiration of his eyes.

"I asked to see you," he answered, respectfully, "because I ride with tidings that may touch you. I am newly from Cambridge."

Brilliana's eyes widened.

"What do you carry from Cambridge?" she asked; then swiftly added, "But first, I pray you, be seated."

She pointed to a chair on one side of the great table, and to set him the example seated herself at another. Halfman bowed and took his appointed place, resting his hat upon his knees.

"Lady," he said, "there was at Cambridge a certain Parliament man who plays at being a soldier, and though he should be no more than plain master, those that would do him pleasure call him Captain or Colonel Cromwell."

Brilliana frowned a little. "I have heard of the man," she said. "He talks treason at Westminster; he is the King's enemy."

Halfman leaned a little nearer to her across the table and spoke with a well-managed air of mystery.

"Captain Cromwell is not only the King's enemy; he is also the enemy of the Lady Brilliana Harby."

Brilliana shook her dark head proudly, and Halfman thought that her curls glanced like the arrows of Apollo.

"Any enemy of the King is an enemy to me, but not he, as I think, more than another."

Halfman tapped the table impressively.

"There you are mistaken, lady," he said. "The man is very especially and particularly your enemy. He has been very busy of late in Cambridge raising train-bands, capturing college plate, and the like naughtinesses, but he has not been so busy as not to hear how the King's flag flies unchallenged from the walls of Harby."

"And shall fly there so long as I live," Brilliana interrupted, hotly.

Halfman smiled approval of her heat, yet shook his head dubiously.

"It shall not fly long unchallenged," he continued. "That is my news. Master Cromwell – may the devil fly away with his soldier's title – is sending hither a company of sour-faced Puritans to bid you haul down your flag."

Even as he spoke his heart glowed at the instant effect of his words upon the woman. She sprang to her feet, with flaming cheeks and blazing eyes, and struck her white hand upon the table.

"That flag flies," she cried, "for the honor of Harby. Whoever challenges the honor of Harby will find it a very dragon, with teeth and claws and a fiery breath."

Halfman sprang to his feet, too, and gave the gallant girl a military salute. Every fibre of him now tingled with loyalty to the royal quarrel; he was a King's man through and through, had been so for sure from his cradle.

"Lady," he almost shouted, "you make a gallant warrior, and I will be proud to serve you." Seeing the surprise in her eyes, he hurried on: "Lady, I am an old soldier, an old sailor. I have seen hot service in hot lands; have helped to take towns and helped to hold towns, and if it be your pleasure, as it will be your prudence, to avail of my aid, I will show you how we can maintain this place against an army."

Brilliana rested her hands on the table, and, leaning forward, looked steadily into Halfman's face. He accepted the scrutiny steadily; he was all in all her servant. She seemed to read so much.

"If your news be true," she said, "and if you do not overboast your skill, why, I shall be very glad of your aid and counsel."

"Your hand on that, gallant captain," clamored Halfman, all aflame of pride and pleasure. And across the oaken table the Lady of Harby and the adventurer clasped hands in compact.

IV THE LEAGUER OF HARBY

Halfman proved himself a creditable henchman. There was much to do and little time to do it in, for any hour might bring news that the enemy was near at hand. Brilliana, as he told her and as she knew, would have done well without him, once she had warning of danger, but, as she told him and as he knew, she did very much better with him. There was no help to be had in the neighborhood, but by Halfman's advice a message was trusted to a sure hand to be carried to Sir Randolph Harby, of Harby Lesser, now with the King, telling him of what was threatened. All the servants were assembled in the great hall, and there Brilliana made them a stirring little speech, to which Halfman listened with applauding pulses. She told them how Harby was menaced; she told them what she meant to do. She and Captain Halfman meant to hold the place for the King so long as there was a place to hold. But she would constrain none to stay with her, and she offered to all who pleased the choice to go down into the village and bide there till the business was ended one way or the other. Not a man of the little household, nor a woman, offered to budge. Perhaps they did not care very much about the quarrel, but they all loved very dearly their wild, high-spirited young mistress, and it was "God save Brilliana!" they were thinking while they shouted "God save the King!"

This was how it came to pass that when the hundred men from Cambridge, under the command of Captain Evander Cloud, made an end of their forced march, they found the iron gates of Harby's park closed against them. This was in itself a matter of little moment, needing but the united efforts of half a dozen stout fellows to arrange. But it was the hint significant of more to follow. The Puritan party tramping through the park was greeted, as it neared the moat, with a volley, purposely aimed high, which brought them to a halt. The Puritans eyed grimly a place whose great natural strength had been most ingeniously increased by skilful fortification, and while their leader advanced alone and composedly across the space between the invaders and the walls of Harby, the followers were bale to note how all the windows were barricaded and loop-holed, and how full of menace the ancient place appeared.

Evander Cloud advanced across the grass until he was within a few feet of the moat. Then an upper window was thrown open, its wooden curtain removed, and a young, fair woman appeared at the opening and quietly asked of the Puritan the meaning of his presence.

Evander Cloud saluted the lady; he could see that she was young and comely. His own face was in shadow and the chatelaine could not distinguish its features.

"Have I the honor to address the Lady Brilliana Harby?" he asked.

"I am the Lady Brilliana Harby," the girl answered. "What is your business here?"

"I come, madam," Evander replied, "a servant of the Parliament and of the English people, to safeguard this mansion in their name."

"You may speak for the London Parliament," Brilliana said, firmly, "but I think you are too bold to speak in the name of the English people. As for this poor house, it can safeguard itself very well, with the help of God."

"Madam," responded Evander, "I am empowered to take by force what I would gladly gain by parley."

"This house is the King's house," Brilliana said, scornfully, "and does not yield to thieves."

"It is the King's evil advisers who have forced civil war upon the land," Evander replied, gravely. "And it is in the King's name and for the King's sake that we would secure this stronghold."

"Ay," retorted Brilliana, derisively. "And do the King honor by hauling down the King's flag. No more words. This is Loyalty House. You have ten minutes in which to withdraw your men."

At the end of that time we shall fire again, and you will find that we can shoot straight. And so you may go to the devil.”

Evander would have appealed anew, but with her last word Brilliana disappeared from the window, which in another moment was barricaded as stubbornly as before.

And this was the beginning of the siege of Harby House.

Mr. Samuel Marfleet, in his “Diurnal of certain events of moment happening of late at Harby,” is very eloquent over the coming of the little company. He sees in them the deliverers from Dagon, the destroyers of Babylon, and in sundry heated if confused allusions to the worship of Ashtaroth, it seems certain that the indignant school-master was vehemently protesting against the popularity of Brilliana. He probably goes too far, however, when he interprets the silence of Harby villagers as the Cambridge company marched through the main street as the silence too great for speech of a liberated people. Harby villagers were, for the most part, serenely indifferent to the quarrels of the court and the Parliament, but they had a hearty liking for Brilliana, and would, if they could, very likely have shown active resentment at the attack upon her home. But with nobody to lead them, there was nothing for them to do but to stare at the grave-faced men in sober clothes with guns upon their shoulders and steel upon their breasts who tramped along towards Harby Hall. Even to the siege itself they were perforce indifferent, seeing very little of it, for the parliamentary leader took care that none of them came into Harby park, and did not, as we may gather from occasional asperities in the “Diurnal,” greatly encourage even the visits of Mr. Marfleet himself.

The full chronicle of that siege does not concern us here. Those that are curious in the matter may seek for ampler information, if they will, in the Marfleet “Diurnal.” Thanks to its situation, thanks to the experience of adventurer Halfman in barricading windows and so loop-holing them for musketry as fully to command the moat on all sides, Harby Hall proved a hard nut to crack. It was but child’s play, indeed, if you chose to compare it with the later leaguer of Lathom, but to those immediately concerned, and to Harby village, all open mouths and open eyes, the business was a very Iliad. There was a great deal of powder burned and but little blood shed. The little Parliament party soon learned that there was no taking the place by a rush or a ruse, that it was discretion to keep due distance and invest. For the besieged, on the other hand, there was no chance of a sortie, their numbers being so few and their provisions were sorely scarce. If no one could for the moment get into Harby, neither could any one get out of Harby.

So day succeeded day, and Halfman found them all enchanted days. He was inevitably much in the company of the lady, and he played the part of an honest gentleman ably. He made the most of his odd scholarship, of that part of his knowledge of the world best likely to commend him to the favor of a gentlewoman; his buccaneering enterprises veiled themselves under the vague phrase of foreign service. He had been in tight places a thousand times; he weighed them as trifles against a chance to win money and the living toys that money can buy. But it was new to him to hold a fort under the command of a woman, and the woman herself was the newest, strangest thing he had ever known. Ever the lover of his abandoned art, he conceived shrewdly enough the character that would not displease Brilliana and played it very consistently: the soldier of fortune true, but one that had tincture of letters and would be a scholar if he could. So the siege hours were also hours of such companionship as he had never experienced, ever desired; he ripened in the sunshine of a girl’s kindness, and he deliberately tied, as it were, the foul pages of his book of memory together with the pink ribbon of a girl’s garter. He would have been content for the siege to last forever. But the siege did not last forever.

V A MONSTROUS REGIMENT

In the great hall at Harby a motley fellowship were assembled. If a stranger from a strange land, wafted thither on some winged Arabian carpet or flying horse of ebony, could have beheld the place and the company, he would have been hard put to it to find any reasonable explanation of what his eyes witnessed. In the middle of the hall some five singular figures stood on line: two tall, powerful lads with foolish faces, flagrant farm-hands; an old, bowed man with the snow of many winters on his hair; an impish lad who might have welcomed fourteen springs; and, finally, a rubicund, buxom woman with very red cheeks, very blue eyes, very brown hair, whose person suggested the kitchen a league off. Each of these persons handled a pike, carrying it at an angle different from that of the others, and each of them gazed with painfully attentive stare at the oaken table near the hearth upon which Hercules Halfman sat learnedly expounding the mysteries of the pike drill, while Thoroughgood stood between him and the awkward squad to illustrate in his own person and with the pike he carried the teachings of the instructor.

“Order your pikes,” Halfman commanded. “Advance your pikes. Shoulder your pikes.” Then, as these orders were obeyed deftly enough by Thoroughgood and with bewildering variety by the others, he continued, “Trail your pikes,” and then broke sharply off to expostulate with one of the farm-hands.

“Now, Timothy Garlinge, call you that trailing of a pike. Why, Gammer Satchell carries herself more soldierly.”

Timothy Garlinge grinned loutishly at this rebuke, but the fat dame whom Halfman’s flourish indicated seemed to dilate with satisfaction.

“It were shame,” she chuckled, “if a handy lass could not better a lobbish lad.”

The impish lad grinned derision.

“Ay,” he commented; “but an old fool’s best at her spits and griddles.”

A most unmilitary titter rippled along the rank but broke upon the rock of Mrs. Satchell’s anger. It might have seemed to many that it were impossible for the dame’s cheeks to be any redder, but Mistress Satchell’s visage showed that nature could still work miracles. With face a rich crimson from chin to forehead, she made to hurl herself upon the leering, fleering mannikin, but was caught in the unbreakable restraint of neighbor Clupp’s clasp.

“You limb, I’ll griddle you!” Mistress Satchell gasped, panting in the embracing arms. Halfman played the peace-maker with a sour smile.

“There, there, goody,” he expostulated; “youth will have its yelp.”

He turned with something of a yawn to Thoroughgood.

“Why a devil did you press gossip cook into the service?”

Thoroughgood shook his head protestingly.

“Nay, the virago volunteered,” he explained, with a look that seemed to supplement speech in the suggestion that it were best to let Mistress Satchell have her own way. This was evidently Mistress Satchell’s own view of the matter.

“Truly,” she exclaimed, “if my lady, being no more than a woman, is man enough to garrison her house against the Roundheads, she cannot deny me, that am no less than a woman, the right to handle a pike.”

Halfman, eying the dame’s assertive rotundities, thought that he would be indeed a quarrelsome fellow who should deny her evident femininity.

“You are a lovely logician,” he approved. “Enough.”

Then resuming his sententious tone of military command, he took up the task where he had left it off.

“Trail your pikes.”

The order was this time obeyed by the company with something approaching resemblance to the action of Thoroughgood, and Halfman went on.

“Cheek your pikes.”

Out of the confused clattering of weapons which ensued, Timothy Garlinge emerged tremulous.

“Please, sir,” he gurgled, “I’ve forgotten how to cheek my pike.”

Halfman mastered exasperation bravely, as, taking a pike from the hands of Thoroughgood, he strove to illuminate rusticity.

“Use your pike thus, noddie,” he lessoned, good-naturedly, wielding the weapon with the skill of a practised pikeman. But the illustration was as much lost upon Garlinge as the original command, and in his attempt to imitate it he whirled his arm so recklessly that his companions scattered in dismay, and Halfman himself was fain to move a step or two backward to avoid the yokel’s meaningless sweeps.

“Have a care,” he cried. “If you work so wild you will damage your company.”

Mrs. Satchell, taking her post in the now restored line, shook her red fist at the delinquent.

“He had best not damage me,” she thundered, “or I’ll damage him to some purpose.”

“Silence in the ranks!” Halfman commanded, sharply. “Charge your pikes,” he ordered.

This order was obeyed indifferently and tamely enough by all save the egregious Mrs. Satchell, who delivered so lusty a thrust with her weapon that Halfman was obliged to skip back briskly to avoid bringing his breast acquainted with her steel.

“Nay, woman, warily!” he shouted, half laughing, half angry. “Play your play more tamely. I am no rascally Roundhead.”

Mrs. Satchell grounded her weapon and wiped the sweat from her shining forehead with the back of her red hand. There was a deadly earnest in her eyes, a deadly earnest in her speech.

“I cry you mercy,” she panted. “But I am a whole-hearted woman, and when you bid me charge I am all for charging.”

Halfman did his best to muffle amusement in a reproving frown. “Limit your zeal discreetly,” he urged, and was again the drill sergeant.

“Shoulder your pikes.”

The weapons followed the words with some show of decorum.

“Comport your pikes.”

Again the evolution was carried out with some degree of accuracy.

“Port your pikes.”

Here all followed the word of command fairly well with the exception of Garlinge’s fellow-rustic, who simply strove to repeat the order already executed. Halfman turned upon him sharply.

“Now, Clupp,” he cried, “will you never learn the difference between port and comport?”

Clupp, the fellow addressed, bashful at finding himself the object of attention, swayed backward and forward with his pikestaff for a pivot, laughing vacantly.

“No, sir,” he gaped, stupidly. Master Halfman’s lip wrinkled menacingly, and he reached his hand to his staff that lay upon the table.

“Indeed!” he said. “Then I must ask Master Crabtree Cudgel to lesson you.”

He advanced threateningly towards the terrified fellow, but long before he could reach him Dame Satchell had interposed her generous bulk between officer and private, not, however, as was soon shown, from any desire to intercede for the culprit.

“Leave him to me, sir,” she entreated, vehemently. “If you love me, leave him to me.”

And, indeed, her angry eyes shone warranty that the offender would fare badly at her hands. Halfman waved her aside with a gesture of impatience.

“Mistress Satchell,” he protested, “you are a valiant woman, but a rampant amazon.”

Dame Satchell’s cheeks glowed a deeper crimson, and her variable anger raged from Clupp to Halfman.

“Call me no names,” she squalled, “though you do call yourself captain, or I’ll call you the son of a –”

However Mistress Satchell intended to finish her objurgation it was not given to the company to learn, for Halfman tripped up her speech with a nimble interruption.

“The son of a pike, so please you,” he suggested, with a smile that softened the virago’s heart. “There, we have toiled enough to-day and it tests our tempers. Dismiss.”

This command he addressed to the whole of his amazing company; to Dame Satchell he gave a congee with a more than Spanish flourish: “To your pots and pans, valorous.”

Dame Satchell, mollified by his compliment, shrugged her fat shoulders. “’Tis little enough I have to put in them,” she grumbled. “Roast or boiled, boiled, fried, or larded, all’s one, all’s none. We’ll be mumbling shoe-leather soon.”

She sighed heavily at the thought, and moved slowly towards the door at the end of the hall beneath the gallery. Halfman, unheeding her, had turned to the table and was intently poring over the large map that lay there together with a loaded pistol. Thoroughgood gave orders to the men.

“Garlinge and Clupp, go scour the pikes. Tom Cropper, find something to keep you out of mischief. As for you, Gaffer Shard, you may rest awhile.”

The old man shook his frosty head vigorously. “Nay, nay,” he piped, “I need no rest. My old bones are loyal and cannot tire in a good cause. God save the King.”

He gave a shrill cheer which was echoed loudly by men and boy, and so cheering they tramped out of the hall in the trail of Mother Satchell, Garlinge staggering under the load of pikes which the lad had officiously foisted on to his shoulder, Clupp laughing vacantly after his manner, and steadfast old Shard waving his red cap and chirping his shrill huzzas.

VI

HOW WILL ALL END?

When they had all gone and the hall was quiet, Thoroughgood came slowly down with a puzzled frown on his honest, weather-beaten face to where Halfman humped over his map.

“Where’s the good of drilling clowns and cooks?” he asked, surlily. He talked like one thoroughly weary, but his mood of weariness seemed to melt before the sunshine of Halfman’s smile as he lifted his head from the map.

“Where’s the harm?” he countered. “’Twas my lady’s idea to keep their spirits up, and, by God! it was a good thought. She knows how it heartens folk to play a great part in a great business: keeps them from feeling the fingers of famine in their inwards, keeps them from whining, repining, declining, what you will. But I own I did not count on the presence of Gammer Cook in the by-play.”

“I could not see why she should be kept out of the mummery,” Thoroughgood responded, “if she had a mind for the masking.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Halfman answered, meditatively. “My lady’s example would make a Hippolyta of any housemaid of them all.”

“I do not know what it would make of them,” Thoroughgood answered; “but I know this, that it matters very little now.”

Halfman swung round on his seat and stared at him curiously.

“Why?” he asked.

“Now that this truce is called,” Thoroughgood answered, “that the Roundhead captain may have speech with my lady.”

“Why, what then?” questioned Halfman, with his eyes so fixed on Thoroughgood’s that Thoroughgood, dogged as he was, averted his gaze.

“Naught’s left but surrender,” he grunted, between his teeth. The words came thickly, but Halfman heard them clearly. He raised his right hand for a moment as if he had a thought to strike his companion, but then, changing his temper, he let it fall idly upon his knee as he surveyed Thoroughgood with a look that half disdained, half pitied.

“My lady will never surrender,” he said, quietly, with the quiet of a man who enunciates a mathematical axiom. “You know that well enough.”

Thoroughgood shrugged plaintive, protesting shoulders.

“We’ve stood this siege for many days,” he muttered. “Food is running out; powder is running out. Even the Lady Brilliana cannot work miracles.”

Halfman rose to his feet. His eyes were shining and he pressed his clinched hands to his breast like a man in adoration.

“The Lady Brilliana can work miracles, does work miracles daily. Is it no miracle that she has held this castle all these hours and days against this rebel leaguer? Is it no miracle that she has poured the spirit of chivalry into scullions and farm-hands and cook-wenches so that not a Jack or Jill of them but would lose bright life blithely for her and the King and God? Is it not a miracle that she has transmuted, by a change more amazing than anything Master Ovid hath recorded in his *Metamorphoses*, a villanous old land-devil and sea-devil like myself into a passionate partisan? But what of me? God bless her! She is my lady-angel, and her will is my will to the end of the chapter.”

He dropped in his chair again as if exhausted by the vehemence of his words and the emotion which prompted them. Thoroughgood contemplated him sourly.

“You prate like a play-actor,” he snarled. Halfman’s whole being flashed into activity again. He was no more a sentimentalist but now a roaring ranter.

“Because I was a play-actor once,” he shouted, “when I was a sweet-and-twenty youngling.”

Thoroughgood eyed Halfman with a sudden air of distrust.

“You never told me you were a play-actor,” he growled. “You spoke only of soldiering.”

Halfman laughed flagrantly in his face.

“Godamercy, man, there has been scant time to tell you my life’s story. We have had other cats to whip. Yes, I was a play-actor once, and played for great poets, for men whose names have never tickled your ears. But the owl-public would have none of me, and, owl-like, hooted me off the boards. But I’ve had my revenge of them. I’ve played a devil’s part on the devil’s stage for thirty red years. Nune Plaudite.”

The Latin tag dropped dead at the porches of John Thoroughgood’s ears, but those ears pricked at part of Halfman’s declamation.

“What kind of parts?” he asked, drawing a little nearer to the soldier of fortune, whose experiences fascinated his inexperience.

Halfman shrugged his shoulders and favored honest Thoroughgood with a bantering, quizzical smile.

“All kinds of parts,” he answered. “How does the old puzzle run? Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, ploughboy, gentleman, thief. I think I have played all those parts, and others, too. Fling beggar and pirate into the dish. But I tell you this, honest John, I have never played a part so dear to me as that of captain to this divine commander. I thank my extravagant stars that steered me home to serve her.”

“You cannot sing her praises too sweetly for my ears,” Thoroughgood answered. “But there is an end to all things, and it looks to me as if we were mighty near to an end of the siege of Harby. Why else should there be a truce called that the Roundhead captain may have speech with my lady.”

“Honest John Thoroughgood,” Halfman answered, with great composure, “you are not so wise as you think. This Roundhead captain has sent us hither the most passionate pleadings to be admitted to parley. Why deny him? It will advantage him no jot, but it is possible we may learn from the leakage of his lips something at least of what is going on in the world.”

“What is there to learn?” asked Thoroughgood. Halfman shook his head reprovably.

“Why, for my part, I should like to learn why in all this great gap of time nothing has been done to help one side or the other. If the gentry of Harby have made no effort to relieve us, neither, on the other hand, has our leaguer been augmented by any reinforcements. If my lady has been surprised that Sir Blaise Mickleton has made no show of coming to her succor, I, for my part, am woundily surprised that the Cropheads of Cambridge have sent no further levies for our undoing.”

“Why, for that matter – ” Thoroughgood began, and then suddenly broke off. “Here comes my lady,” he said, turning and standing in an attitude of respectful attention.

Halfman had known of her coming before his companion spoke. The Lady Brilliana had come out on to the gallery from the door near the head of the stairway, and Halfman was conscious of her presence before he lifted his eyes and looked at her. She was not habited now, as on the day when he first beheld her, in her riding-robe of green, but in a simple house-gown chosen for the ease and freedom it allowed to a great lady who had suddenly found that she had much to do. The color of the stuff, a crimson, as being a royal, loyal color, well became her fine skin and her dark curls and her bright, imperious eyes. She was followed by her serving-woman, Tiffany, a merry girl that Thoroughgood adored, and one that would in days gone over have been likely to tickle the easy whimsies of Halfman. Now he had no eyes, no thoughts, save for her mistress, the lass unparalleled.

Brilliana was speaking to Tiffany even as she entered the gallery.

“Strip more lint, Tiffany,” she ordered; “and bid Andrew be brisk with the charcoal.”

Her voice was as buoyant as the song of a free bird, and her step on the stair as light as if there were no such thing in the world as a leaguer. Tiffany crossed the gallery and disappeared through the opposite door. Brilliana, as she descended the stair, diverted her speech to Thoroughgood.

“John Thoroughgood, I saw from the lattice our envoys bringing the Parliament man down the elm walk. To them at once. They must not unhood their hawk till he come to our presence.”

VII

MISTRESS AND MAN

When Thoroughgood had left the hall and Brilliana came to the floor, Halfman questioned her, very respectfully, but still with the air of one who has earned the friendly right to put questions.

“Why do you see this black-jack?” he asked. Brilliana smiled at him as radiantly as if the holding of a house against armed enemies was the properest, pleasantest business imaginable.

“With the littlest good-will in the world, I promise you,” she answered. “But, you know, he so plagued for the parley that it was easier to try him than deny him. Besides, good friend and captain, I learn from what I read in Master Froissart’s Chronicles that it were neither customary nor courteous to deny conference to a supplicating enemy.”

Halfman adored her for her courage, for her calm assumption of success.

“How if he but come to spy out our strategies?” he asked. “The leanness of our larder? Our empty bandoliers?”

Brilliana beamed back at him with her bewildering confidence.

“I have thought of that, too,” she admitted. “But he shall not find us at our wit’s-end. Seek Simon Butler, friend captain. Though our cellars are near empty he will make shift to find you some full flagons. Bring hither a bunch of your subalterns, the rosiest, the most jovial, if any still carry such colors and boast such spirit; let them gather in the banqueting-hall, where, with such wit as French wine can give, let them sing as if they were merry and well fed. Our sanctimonious spy-out-the-nakedness-of-the-land must think we are well victualled, he must think we are well mannered.”

Halfman made her a sweeping reverence which was not without its play-actor’s grace, though its honesty might have pardoned a greater awkwardness.

“We are well womaned, lady,” he asseverated, “with you for our leader. By sea and by land I have served some great captains, but never one greater than you for constancy and manly valor.”

Brilliana’s bright face took a swift look of gravity and she gave a little sigh.

“The King’s cause,” she said, soberly, “might turn a child into a champion.”

The steady loyalty that made her words at once a psalm and a battle-cry bade Halfman’s pulses tingle. Who could be found unfaithful where this fair maid was so faithful? Yet he remembered their isolation and the memory made him speak.

“I marvel that none of your neighbors have tried to lend us a hand?”

“How could they?” Brilliana asked, astonished. “The brave are with the King at Shrewsbury; the stay-at-homes are not fighters.”

“Hum,” commented Halfman. “What of Master Paul Hungerford?”

Brilliana shrugged her shoulders.

“A miserly daw, who would not risk a crown to save the crown.”

Halfman questioned again.

“What of Master Peter Rainham?”

Brilliana shrugged again.

“A dull, sullen skinflint waiting on event.”

Halfman’s inventory was not complete.

“You have yet a third neighbor,” he said, “and, as I heard, a prodigal in protestation. What of Sir Blaise Mickleton?”

Brilliana’s lips twitched with a derisive smile.

“Sir Blaise, honest gentleman, loves good cheer and good ease. I think he would not quit the board if Armageddon were towards. He will be for eating, he will be for drinking, he will be for

sleeping, and in the mean time God's chosen gentlemen have learned the value of living so long as to grant them a death for their King."

Her voice had risen to a cry of defiance, but now it dropped again to its former note of bantering irony.

"What a wonderful world it is which can hold at once such men as my cousin Randolph or you or Rufus Quarryll and these hangbacks who shame Harby. These three are professed my very good suitors, but they have made no move to our help. Well, let them hang for a tray of knaves. We need them not. We know that the King's cause must triumph and so we are wise to be blithe."

Halfman's head was swinging with pleasure. She had counted him in so glibly with the chosen ones, with the servants of God and the King. He was very sure now that his watch-word had always been "God and the King."

"The King's cause must triumph," he echoed, his face shining with loyal confidence.

"How we shall all smile a year hence," Brilliana answered, "to think that such pitiful rebels vexed us. But for the moment there is one of these same rebels to be faced – and to be fooled. About our plan, good captain."

Halfman saluted her more enthusiastically than he had ever saluted male commander.

"My general," he vowed, "he shall think these walls hold an army of wassaillers."

He turned on his heel and marched briskly out of the hall. Brilliana looked after him, with the bright smile on her face, till the door of the banqueting-hall closed behind him; then the smile slowly faded from her face.

"I would my spirits were as blithe as my speech," she thought, as she went to the table and bent over it, looking at the open map which Halfman had been studying.

"What is going on in England, the King's England, little England, that should not be big enough to have any room for traitors?"

She put her finger on the spot where Harby figured on the sheet.

"Here," she mused, "we have been sundered from the world for all these days by this Roundhead leaguer, hearing no outside news but the ring of rebel shots and the sound of rebel voices. What has happened? What is happening? When we began the King was at Shrewsbury and the Parliament ruled London. What has come to the Parliament since? What has come to the King? Well, Loyalty House will carry the King's flag so long as one stone tops another. We will live as long as we can for his Majesty, and then die for him gamely."

VIII THE ENVOY

A sound of heavy steps disturbed her meditations. She stood up from her map, blinked down the tears that tried to rise, and turned to face new fortune.

“Here is our enemy,” she said to herself, and she forced back the confident color to her cheeks, the confident light to her eyes. The door from the park opened, and John Thoroughgood entered the room, holding by the hand a man in the staid habit of a Puritan soldier, whose eyes were muffled by a folded scarf of silk. Blindfolded though he was, the Puritan followed his guide with a steady and resolute step.

“Halt!” cried Thoroughgood. The stranger stood quietly as if on parade, while Thoroughgood saluted his mistress.

“Unhood your hawk,” Brilliana ordered. Thoroughgood, obedient, unpicked the knot of the handkerchief, revealing his companion’s face. Brilliana observed with a hostile curiosity a tallish, well-set, comely man of about thirty years of age, whose smooth, well-featured face asserted high breeding and a gravity which deepened into melancholy in the dark expressive eyes and lightened into lines of humor about the fine, firm mouth. For a moment, with the removal of the muffle, he seemed dazzled by the change from dark to light; then, as command of his vision returned, he observed Brilliana and made her a courteous salutation which she returned coldly. She made a gesture of dismissal to Thoroughgood, who went out, and the Lady of Loyalty was left alone with her enemy.

There was a moment’s silence as the pair faced each other, the man quietly discreet, the woman openly scornful. She was under the same roof with a rebel in arms, and the thought sickened her. She broke the silence.

“You petitioned to see me.” With the sound of her voice she found new vehemence, new indignation. “Do your rebels offer unconditional surrender?”

The circumstances of the astonishing question brought for the moment a slight smile to the grave face of the Parliament man.

“It was scarcely with that thought,” he answered, “that I sought for a parley.”

Though the man’s smile had been short-lived, Brilliana had seen it and loathed him for it. Though the man’s manner was suave, it seemed to wear the suavity of success and she loathed him for that, too.

“We waste time,” she cried, impatiently, “with any other business than your swift submission.”

Then as she saw him make an amiably protesting gesture she raged at him with a rising voice.

“Oh, if you knew how hard it is for me to stand in the same room with a renegade traitor you would, if such as you remember courtesy, be brief in your errand.”

The man showed no consciousness of the insult in her words and in her manner save than by a courteous inclination of the head and a few words of quiet speech.

“Much may be pardoned to so brave a lady.”

Brilliana struck her hand angrily upon the table once and again.

“For God’s sake do not praise me!” she almost screamed, “or I shall hate myself. Your errand, your errand, your errand!”

The enemy was provokingly imperturbable.

“You have a high spirit,” he said, “that must compel admiration from all. That is why I would persuade you to wisdom. I came hither from Cambridge by order of Colonel Cromwell.”

Brilliana's lips tightened at the sound of the name which the envoy pronounced with so much reverence.

"The rebel member for Cambridge," she sneered – "the mutinous brewer. Are you a vassal of the man of beer?"

There was a quiet note of protest in the reply of the envoy.

"Colonel Cromwell is not a brewer, though he would be no worse a man if he were. I am honored in his friendship, in his service. He is a great man and a great Englishman."

"And what," Brilliana asked, "has this great man to do with Harby that he sends you here?"

"He sends me here," the Puritan answered, "to haul down your flag."

"That you shall never do," Brilliana answered, steadily, "while there is a living soul in Harby."

The Puritan protested with appealing hands.

"You are in the last straits for lack of food, for lack of fuel, for lack of powder."

Brilliana made a passionate gesture of denial.

"You are as ignorant as insolent," she asserted. "Loyalty House lacks neither provisions nor munitions of war."

There was a kind of respectful pity in the stranger's face as he watched the wild, bright girl and hearkened to the vain, brave words.

"Nay, now – " he began, out of the consciousness of his own truer knowledge, but what he would have said was furiously interrupted by a volume of strange sounds from the adjoining banqueting-hall. There was a rattle and clink as of many pewter mugs banged lustily upon an oaken table; there was a shrill explosion of laughter, the work of many merry voices; there was the grinding noise of heavy chairs pushed back across the floor for the greater ease of their occupants; there was a tapping as of pipe-bowls on the board, and then over all the mingled din rose a voice, which Brilliana knew for the voice of Halfman, ringing out a resonant appeal.

"The King's health, friends, to begin with."

All the noises that had died down to allow Halfman a hearing began again with fresh vigor. It was obvious to the most unsophisticated listener that here was the fag end of a feast and the moment for the genial giving of toasts. Many voices swelled a loyal chorus of "The King, the King!" and had the great doors of the banqueting-hall been no other than bright glass it would have been scarce easier for the man and woman in the great hall to realize what was happening, the revellers rising to their feet, the drinking-vessels lifted high in air with loyal vociferations, and then the silence, eloquent of tilted mugs and the running of welcome liquor down the channels of thirsty throats. This silence was broken by some one calling for a song, to which call he who had proposed the King's health answered instantly and with evident satisfaction. His rich if somewhat rough voice came booming through the partitions, carolling a ballad to which the Puritan listened with a perfectly unmoved countenance, while the Lady Brilliana's eager face expressed every signal of the liveliest delight.

This was the song that came across the threshold:

"What creature's this with his short hairs,
His little band and huge long ears,
That this new faith hath founded?
The Puritans were never such,
The saints themselves had ne'er so much,
Oh, such a knave's a Roundhead."

A yell of pleasure followed this verse, and a tuneless chorus thundered the refrain, "Oh, such a knave's a Roundhead," with the most evident relish for the sentiments of the song. Brilliana

looked with some impatience at the unruffled face of her adversary, and when the immediate clamor dwindled she addressed him, sarcastically:

“These revellers,” she said, “would not seem to be at the last extremity. But their festival must not deafen our conference.”

She advanced to the door of the banqueting-room and struck against it with her hand. On the instant silence she opened the door a little way and spoke through softly, as if gently chiding those within.

“Be merry more gently, friends. Sure, I cannot hear the gentleman speak. Though,” she added, reflectively, as she closed the door and returned again to the table she had quitted – “though God knows he talks big enough.”

The Puritan clapped his palms together as if in applause, an action that somewhat amazed her in him, while a kindly humor kindled in his eyes.

“Bravely staged, bravely played,” he admitted, while he shook his head. “But it will not serve your turn, for it may not deceive me. I had a message this morning from my Lord Essex. There has been hot fighting; Heaven has given us the victory; the King’s cause is wellnigh lost at the first push.”

Brilliana felt her heart drumming against her stays, but she turned a defiant face on the news-monger.

“I do not believe you,” she answered. “The King’s cause will always win.”

The soldier took no notice of her denial; he felt too sure of his fact to hold other than pity for the leaguered lady. He quietly added:

“My Lord Essex advises me further that reinforcements are marching to me well equipped with artillery against which even these gallant walls are worthless. Be warned, be wise. You cannot hope to hold out longer. For pity’s sake, yield to the Parliament.”

Brilliana waved his pleas away with a dainty, impatient flourish.

“You chatter republican vainly. I have store of powder. I will blow this old hall heaven high when I can no longer hold it for the King.”

Her visitor looked at her sadly, made as if to speak, paused, and then appeared to force himself to reluctant utterance.

“Lady,” he said, slowly, “though we be opponents, we share the same blood. Let a kinsman entreat you to reason.”

If the civil-spoken stranger had struck her in the face with his glove Brilliana could not have been more astonished or angered. She moved a little nearer to him, interrogation in her shining eyes and on her angry cheeks.

“Are you mad?” she gasped. “How could such a thing as you be my kinsman?”

She had taunted him again and again during their brief interview and he had shown no sign of displeasure. He showed no sign of displeasure now, answering her with simple dignity.

“Very simply. A lady of your race, your grandsire’s sister, married a poor gentleman of my name and was my father’s mother.”

Brilliana drew back a little as if she had indeed received a blow. Involuntarily, she put up her hand to her eyes as if to shut out the sight of this importunate fellow.

“I have heard something of that tale,” she whispered, “but dimly, for we in Harby do not care to speak of it. When my grandsire’s sister shamed her family by wedding with a Puritan her people blotted her from their memory. You will not find her picture on the walls of Harby.”

“The loss is Harby’s,” the soldier answered, “for I believe she was as fair as she was good. She married an honest gentleman named Cloud, whose honesty compelled him to profess the faith he believed in. My name is Evander Cloud.”

He waited for a moment as if he expected her to speak, but she uttered no word, only faced him rigidly with hatred in her gaze.

Seeing her silent, he resumed:

“It was this sad kinship pushed me to a parley wherein, perhaps, I have something strained my strict duty. But the voice of our common blood cried out in me to urge you to reason. You have done all that woman, all that man could do. Yield now, while I can still offer you terms, and your garrison shall march out with all the honors of war, drums beating, matches burning, colors flying.”

He was very earnest in his appeal, and Brilliana heard him to the end in silence, with her clinched hands pressed against her bosom. Then she turned fiercely upon him and her voice was bitter.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.